Asiatische Studien
Études Asiatiques
LXV · 2 · 2011

Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft
Revue de la Société Suisse – Asie

Peter Lang
Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

ISSN 0004-4717

Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern
info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com, www.peterlang.net

Printed in Germany

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The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. An Epic of Ancient India. Volume VI: *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Translation and Annotation by GOLDMAN, Robert P. / Sally J. SUTHERLAND GOLDMAN / Barend A. VAN NOOTEN. Introduction by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. 1632 p. ISBN 978-0-691-06663-9.

The translation of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (The Book of War) is the sixth volume of this *Rāmāyaṇa* translation following the Critical Edition of the text[1] (the previous book, the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, appeared in 1996, edited by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman). As the authors remark in their Preface, translating the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* took a long time due to various factors: several translators cum editors, all burdened with numerous other duties, and, especially, the length and richness of the text, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* being the longest, and in many ways most central book of the Rāmāyaṇa. For here, Rāma finally gets to fulfill his divine mission: killing Rāvaṇa. As the authors write in their introduction (p. 4): "[…] if the *Rāmakathā* is about any one thing, it is the history of God's descent to destroy the very avatar of evil in the world in keeping with the principle so famously stated by Rāma's successor incarnation Kṛṣṇa at *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7–8." The authors' tremendous effort has certainly proved worthwhile, and the resulting volume is impressive: first, obviously, due to its voluminous bulk and size (over 1600 pages!), but mainly due to the amount of research and careful scholarship that went into its making.

In its lay out, this volume follows the model of the previous volumes published so far: an Introduction (pp. 1–118), followed by the Translation (pp. 119–494), and finally the Notes (pp. 495–1551), which occupy the main part of the text. The work is completed by several glossaries (of proper nouns, flora and fauna, and – very appropriately for the book of war – weapons), a list of emendations and corrections of the Critical Edition, a bibliography and a very detailed index that provides an excellent tool to research the text.

The introduction contains several chapters, the main topics of which we shall presently review. The section called "Statecraft and Violence: The Themes of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*" contains many interesting and pithy observations on the principal themes of this *kāṇḍa.* The authors first comment on the narrative technique employed by the narrator of this *kāṇḍa* in order to sustain the listener /

1 See BHATT, Govindlal Hargovind, *et al*. (ed.): *The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*. 7 vols. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960–1975.

reader's interest: moving back and forth "in an almost cinematic fashion" (p. 17) between different locales, mainly in Lankā: Rāvaṇa's court, Rāma's camp, Sītā's "prison", and the battlefield. All this is framed by the coming from the mainland at the beginning, and the return to Ayodhyā at the end of the canto. "In this way the Book […] has a sort of annular structure of the 'there and back again' type that characterizes many folk and epic quest tales" (p. 18).

Goldman and Sutherland Goldman then go on to draw certain parallels between this war-book and the war-books in the *Mahābhārata*: both tend to focus on individual combats between two distinguished warriors. But the *Mahābhārata* mainly describes duels between *ratha*s: warriors fighting on chariots, whereas in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* only the *rākṣasa*s are thus equipped. Rāma's monkey-soldiers, on the other hand, fight on foot. Only in the final battle against Rāvaṇa does Rāma get to fight on a chariot lent by Indra himself. The monkeys mostly fight with improvised weapons such as boulders and tree-trunks, which "lends many of the battle scenes in the *kāṇḍa* a kind of raw, even savage quality in which the chaos of violent conflict and the general 'fog of war' is starkly rendered" (p. 20). This leads to an "aesthetics of violence" that sometimes involves "the juxtaposition of the emetic and the aesthetic" (p. 22), as the authors humorously, yet quite aptly, remark (also on p. 92). Apart from direct violence, the *rākṣasa*s also employ other means to achieve (temporary) victory: they combine psychological warfare with black magic (*abhicāra*) in order to demoralize the enemy. Indrajit makes himself invisible and routs the monkey army, a false (*māyā*) Sītā is decapitated in front of the monkey troops, and a simulacrum of Rāma's chopped off head is paraded in front of Sītā, so as to make her abandon all hope.

While the book contains of course mainly battle-scenes, it is by no means restricted to those. As the authors note, it contains also much that belongs to the domain of *nīti-* or *dharma-śāstra*: politics and ethics. In times of crises, various characters make speeches on these topics. The surprising thing is that even "evil" *rākṣasa*s such as Mālyavat, Rāvaṇa's paternal uncle, and the worst of all, Rāvaṇa's brother Kumbhakarṇa, who is otherwise systematically depicted as the most monstrous and devious of all *rākṣasa*s, make dharmic speeches and rebuke Rāvaṇa for his actions! As Goldman and Sutherland Goldman remark: "This theme of the 'righteous *rākṣasa*' is clearly an important one to Vālmīki" (p. 34). On the other hand, it once happens that the usually righteous Lakṣmaṇa makes a resolutely anti-dharmic, cynical and materialistic speech (*Rāmāyaṇa* 6.70), to which, strangely, Rāma entirely fails to respond – something that may be explained by his state of utter weakness at the moment. In general, this *kāṇḍa*

stresses the humanity of the hero, Rāma, an essential prerequisite to his being able to kill the arch-demon, who had precisely *not* asked invulnerability from men.

The section entitled "The Major Characters of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*" is mainly descriptive and enumerative, yet the authors also offer some insightful glimpses of character analysis. This section is very useful, since it lists the main deeds performed by the most important characters in this *kāṇḍa*, discussed under four headings: "the humans", "the monkeys", "the *rākṣasa*s" and "the *rākṣasī*s".

As Goldman and Sutherland Goldman note, the humans are few in this chapter, since the action takes place in territories that hardly have any human inhabitants. They are limited to Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, and, at the very end, Bharata. Concerning Rāma, the authors note that his character is consistent with what it is elsewhere in the text: stalwart, brave, virtuous. But his emotions (grief, rage, despair) are especially stressed in this book of war, and he sometimes utterly loses his composure, for instance when the *māyā*-Sītā is decapitated in front of him. But, as the authors note in a useful *caveat*: "The focus on the vulnerability of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in the Book, however, should not blind us to the fact that, for Vālmīki, here as throughout the poem, the heroes are always understood to be *aṃśāvatāra*s of Lord Viṣṇu." (p. 49–50) This, they go on to explain, is corroborated by other episodes in the book: Garuḍa's (Viṣṇu's vehicle) spontaneous intervention to free the two brothers from the binding serpent-arrows; Mālyavat's speech, in which he tells Rāvaṇa that Rāma is Viṣṇu himself; the scene where Hanumat alone is able to carry Lakṣmaṇa, who proves far too heavy for Rāvaṇa.

Sītā, they note, "is rendered with extraordinary skill by the poet as a character capable of the expression of a full and finely drawn range of emotions" (p. 51). In this book, where she is subjected to numerous extremely violent shocks, Sītā does not lose her dignity, nor her capacity to reason (as in the scene of the fire ordeal), nor her feeling of human compassion, as when Hanumat proposes to kill the *rākṣasī*s who had been guarding her, a deed she adamantly refuses to condone.

Lakṣmaṇa's role, as they note, is largely a passive one in this book. His main intervention lies in his slaying one of the most formidable *rākṣasa*s, Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit. The description of this battle occupies not less than seven *sarga*s (6.72–78).

The monkey who plays the most important role in this book is, of course, Hanumat. Indeed his presence is essential, for he is asked by Rāma to perform a number of special missions, and he plays a decisive role in the battle itself. The

Yuddhakāṇḍa is especially important for the development of Hanumat's mythology, for, as the authors note, "The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* also contains, in full or nascent form, the episodes that, in their endlessly repeated literary and plastic representation, have given rise to the three perhaps best-known and most widely recognized iconic images of the great monkey hero" (p. 64). These three episodes are: Hanumat carrying (separately) the two brothers on his shoulders; Hanumat receiving as a reward a magnificent pearl necklace from Sītā; Hanumat bringing back from the Himalaya the mountain with the healing herbs.

The passage on Rāvaṇa contains many pithy remarks. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman note that the figure of Rāvaṇa is far from monolithic. He is of course cruel and tends to fly into a towering rage at the slightest provocation, but he can also feel genuine grief, for instance when his brother Kumbhakarṇa or his son Indrajit die. They show how, from arrogant, invincible and intractable at the beginning of the book, he slowly cracks under the strain and becomes "querulous, paranoid, depressive and self-pitying, even admitting at one point the foolishness of having carried off Sītā" (p. 70). In an interesting parallel between the two epics, they liken him to the *Mahābhārata*'s tragic hero Karṇa, who, like the *rākṣasa*-king, made one big mistake (he chose the Kauravas' side), but stuck to his choice till the bitter end. Concluding the passage on Rāvaṇa, they remark: "In his towering stature, megalomania, pride, and power, vitiated only by his mad and self-destructive passion for the one thing in the universe he cannot possess, he comes as close as any figure in the epic to an approximation of a classic tragic hero" (p. 75).

If Rāvaṇa is tragic, "Rāvaṇa's gargantuan younger brother, the voracious but somnolent giant Kumbhakarṇa" (p. 75) provides some comic relief (*hāsya rasa*), especially in the very famous scene where the *rākṣasa*s wake him up. Kumbhakarṇa is the most monstrous of all demons, yet even he is not completely one-sided: he is one of the few who dares to lecture Rāvaṇa on the folly of his ways, referring to *dharmaśāstra* in a knowledgeable fashion.

Another important *rākṣasa* is Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit: he is certainly one of the most formidable opponents in war, due to his knowledge of black magic, which he uses to make himself invisible. Indrajit's power and invincibility result from "a deadly combination of asceticism and sacrifice, the two most empowering practices of the epic tradition" (p. 79).

As for Rāvaṇa's virtuous brother Vibhīṣaṇa, he plays an extremely important role in the war-book for he alone is able to give Rāma insider's information on the *rākṣasa*s (for instance, he can see through the illusions of Indrajit, and advises Lakṣmaṇa to kill him before he completes one more sacrifice). The

authors make some interesting remarks on Vibhīṣaṇa, who represents, as they note, "one of the most striking and theologically significant character types in the Vaiṣṇava literature, that of the virtuous, or dharmic, demon" (p. 81). And they go on to compare him to another of this ilk, the *asura* prince Prahlāda. Yet, something of a stain remains attached to Vibhīṣaṇa, even to this day, as evidenced in certain proverbs, since he betrayed his elder brother and defected to the other side – and indeed, if one reflects, it is one thing not to follow one's brother in his evil ways, but quite another thing to go over to the enemy camp. Vibhīṣaṇa's betrayal appears especially shocking in the epic, where obedience to one's elders is consistently extolled as one of the paramount virtues. In this, the authors compare Vibhīṣaṇa to Rāma's younger brothers, who "unquestioningly obey him even when they find his orders disturbing" (p. 83, note 184). Given this state of affairs, it would have been interesting to discuss why, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, Vibhīṣaṇa is never blamed for his deed.

As for the *rākṣasī*s, the authors note that the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* does not contain so many scenes where they are shown threatening the poor captive Sītā, but they are mostly cast in more sympathetic roles, encouraging her, and offering friendly advice and help, especially Saramā and Trijaṭā.

In the section entitled "Style and Structure of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*", the authors again take up certain topics mentioned earlier, and finally zoom in on a theme that has loomed in the background throughout their Introduction, namely, the "cinematic" quality of this book of war. As they note: "this Book […] seems to lend itself to a cinematic type of structure and framing. In this respect, referring anachronistically to this modern medium may be a useful window through which to view and better appreciate the art of Vālmīki" (p. 91). They compare the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* mainly to modern and occidental movies: movies on biblical themes and natural disasters, monster movies (due to the scenes with Kumbhakarṇa), and also war movies. What especially lends a cinematic quality to this book, according to the authors, is the fact that: "More than any of the preceding Books, which tend mainly to follow the adventures and fortunes of one central character, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, by virtue of its theme, frequently shifts its perspective back and forth between the camps and councils of Rāma and Rāvaṇa […]" (p. 94). Another feature that allows them to compare the Book of War with certain types of movies, is "the foregrounding and aestheticization of violence. As noted earlier, Vālmīki appears to delight in graphic descriptions of massive and sanguinary violence" (p. 91). This trait, we may however note, is not only restricted to Vālmīki, but seems to belong to the Sanskrit epic genre. At least, the sister epic, the *Mahābhārata*, contains very similar scenes highlighting

the gory beauty of the battle scenes.[2] This very informed and detailed comparison between the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* and the cinematic genre is certainly interesting. It would also have been interesting to examine what the Indian movies inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇa* – and they are many, especially in regional Indian cinema – make of this book of war: did they represent the great battle, and how? Or, did they rather choose to refrain from showing the scenes of war, following in this the dictates of the Sanskrit dramatic conventions?

Concluding this section, the authors make some interesting remarks on the famous *phalaśruti* that ends Book 6, which has led many scholars to believe that "the 'original *Rāmāyaṇa*' must have ended with the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*" (p. 96). The authors note that it would be wrong to jump to this conclusion simply on the basis of the presence of the *phalaśruti* in this place: it may have been kept at the end of Book 6 simply because this book marks the end of Rāma's mission, and was therefore considered a very appropriate and auspicious place for a *phalaśruti*. In any case, they note, "the manuscript evidence for the *phalaśruti* is so complicated as to suggest that, whatever the relative date of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, the *phalaśrutis* must have been still later additions, appended to the Book for reasons of piety" (p. 97).

The sixth and last section of the Introduction is called "Text, Translation, and Commentaries". The authors first note that the Critical Edition of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* contains more problematical readings and typographical errors than the other Books. Therefore they were frequently compelled to disagree with the choices made by the editors of the Critical Edition, and even, occasionally, to emend them (see the list of emendations and corrections of the Critical Edition on pp. 1561–1562).

Concerning the commentators on the Book of War, Goldman and Sutherland Goldman remark that although a few commentators seem to have worked independently, "the major commentators seem to fall into commentarial schools or lineages even if the relative chronology of the individual commentators within a given lineage is difficult to determine" (p. 106). They notice that these commentators were especially concerned with the degree of humanity of the main heroes, Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, and the extent to which their suffering was *real* or only *played*. Their interpretations were frequently coloured by "the medieval devotional *Rāmāyaṇa* texts and traditions" (p. 103), and they some-

2 Especially in *Mahābhārata* 6.85.31–34; 6.92.54–75; 7.48.22–30; 7.123.30–41; 8.14.26–59; 8.36.8–9; 9.8.13–23. On this, see Danielle FELLER: *The Sanskrit Epics' Representation of Vedic Myths*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, chapter 6.

times did not hesitate to "manipulate the language" (p. 102) to explain away outward signs of suffering displayed by the heroes.

Concerning their annotation of the translation, the authors remark that they have taken the decision to translate nearly all the star passages (except very long ones) given in the critical apparatus of the Critical Edition, which explains to some extent why the notes are so extensive. Also, they have chosen to quote the commentators extensively (giving the original Sanskrit and the translation), since many editions containing these commentaries are nowadays unavailable. About the translation itself, Goldman and Sutherland Goldman explain some of the choices they have made: Sanskrit being extraordinarily rich in synonyms, how they chose to translate the different synonyms of one word, for instance "monkey". Also, they comment on some of the peculiar difficulties met while translating this book of war, for instance, how to translate the names of various weapons. This section ends with an appreciation of a number of previous translations (mostly into European languages) based on various non-critical editions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The translation itself is, as usual in these volumes, practically impeccable: both elegant and faithful to the original. Therefore, the translators' fears, as expressed in the introduction,[3] are, in my humble opinion, unfounded (but admittedly, I am not a native English-speaker). Despite their professed "commitment to leave no element of the original untranslated" (p. 109), the translators have chosen the wise path to let certain basically untranslatable words stand in the original Sanskrit. For instance, certain bird names or tree names (on which the relevant glossaries provide the needful information) or the omnipresent word *rākṣasa* and other similar names designating classes of beings. In any case, one can only translate a certain amount of a given culture. It is quite illusory to imagine that a modern reader could read this translation without to some extent getting immersed in the – real and imaginary – world of ancient India, and without tackling some of the vocabulary that is relevant to it.

The notes (pp. 497–1551) occupy the greatest part of the volume. In fact, they occupy nearly three times as much space as the translation itself (pp. 121–494). The least one can say about them is that they are exhaustive. They comment on virtually everything that is in the least problematic or deserving of an explanation. As already mentioned above, the notes contain the translations of

3 "We were often forced by the highly compacted style of the epic Sanskrit to resort to a prose style less felicitous than we would have liked" (p. 109).

the star passages, i.e., passages left out from the Critical Edition. They also mention certain variant readings, and give cross-references, and references to other Sanskrit texts, whenever required. All these, as well as the quotations and translations of the commentators' opinions on certain interesting issues, prove invaluable for the Sanskrit scholar. One general observation is that these notes are principally meant for the scholar rather than for the general reader. It is very likely that the non-specialist will be discouraged from going through them by their mostly very technical nature. Sometimes, their dense aspect, full of Sanskrit citations and references, unfortunately makes it uneasy to track down "informative" comments that are meant to provide explanations on certain culturally alien terms or concepts – which is not to say, of course, that such information does not exist. Furthermore, the translators display a marked tendency, whenever their translation swerves even in the slightest from the original Sanskrit, to give the literal translation in the notes. This way of proceeding is certainly motivated by the laudable wish to be as precise as possible, yet it also serves to inflate the notes to a perhaps unnecessary extent. Examples of this are extremely numerous, but to quote a few chosen at random: in *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.4.18, *vyādideśa* is translated as "gave those orders". The note to this verse on p. 523 glosses this as "literally, 'he commanded'". In 6.83.3, *saṃdaśya daśanair oṣṭham* is translated as "gnawing at his lip". The note on p. 1269 specifies that it literally means "having bitten [his] lip with [his] teeth". Or, in 6.83.6, the compound *bhayārditāḥ* is translated as "stricken with fear". In the note on p. 1270, the translators remark that it means literally "afflicted with fear".[4] In all these examples (and they could be multiplied almost indefinitely), the difference between the chosen translation and the literal one is extremely slight, and we may wonder who such remarks are really aimed at? Nobody expects an absolutely literal, word-by-word translation from Sanskrit into English: this would be impossible, or at least quite unpalatable. For the non-specialist, such slight variations in meaning are probably of no great importance, and the Sanskrit scholar has ready access to the Sanskrit text (will probably even be working from the Sanskrit text) and can easily check the exact original.

4 Sometimes, though, the literal meaning indicated in the notes is not quite as literal as it should be. For instance, verse 6.3.26, describing the *rākṣasa*s' army, contains *aśva-vāhāś ca*, which is translated quite accurately as "and cavalry". The note on p. 514 specifies: "Literally, 'horsemen'". In fact, if we really wanted to be literal, we should note that the *bahu-vrīhi* compound *aśva-vāha* designates "one whose conveyance is a horse". Unlike "horsemen", it can hence apply to men as well as to *rākṣasa*s, as is the case here.

These slight critiques are not for even a second meant to distract from the overwhelming merits of this publication, which will stand as a model of what should be achieved in this type of work. Yet, for the sake of the more slender-wristed readers, and for those who merely wish to enjoy a good story, it is to be hoped that this translation of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, like the five previous translation volumes,[5] will also appear separately, without the critical apparatus.

Danielle Feller

5 See *The Clay Sanskrit Library*. New York: New York University Press, 2005–2007.